

12. April 2024

## The advice of Gamaliel

Acts 5:34-42

*One member of the Sanhedrin, however, a Pharisee called Gamaliel, who was a teacher of the Law respected by the whole people, stood up and asked to have the men taken outside for a time. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin, 'Men of Israel, be careful how you deal with these people. Some time ago there arose Theudas. He claimed to be someone important, and collected about four hundred followers; but when he was killed, all his followers scattered and that was the end of them. And then there was Judas the Galilean, at the time of the census, who attracted crowds of supporters; but he was killed too, and all his followers dispersed. What I suggest, therefore, is that you leave these men alone and let them go. If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will be unable to destroy them. Take care not to find yourselves fighting against God.' His advice was accepted; and they had the apostles called in, gave orders for them to be flogged, warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name. Every day they went on ceaselessly teaching and proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus, both in the temple and in private houses.*

Gamaliel's counsel has attained a certain fame, so that to this day we say in the Church: "If this work is of God, it will grow; but if it is not of God, it will be dissolved".

If we apply this maxim to history, we can say with certainty that the Church must be of God, for in spite of so many attacks, persecutions, divisions, sins and confusions, it still stands to this day. Something similar could also be said about the People of Israel: it still exists, despite the unimaginable sufferings and persecutions it had to go through. And not only does it still exist as a people, but today it even has a state of its own, and Jews from all over the world are invited to settle in Israel. This statement is independent of one's political judgement of the situation. So, looking at history in retrospect, we see that Gamaliel's advice is confirmed.

In the case of today's reading, Gamaliel's advice helps to free the apostles from the situation they were in. The suggestion seemed to make sense even to those who did not know what to do with the apostles. The situation had become increasingly difficult for the Sanhedrin. On the one hand, they were unwilling to acknowledge the works that the apostles were doing, for their hearts were closed. On the other hand, they were constantly confronted with God's action, which was manifested through the apostles in the sight of all. Therefore they no longer knew what to do. This attitude of helplessness can be seen in the fact that they were scourged and forbidden to continue to speak in the name of Jesus, even though they knew that the apostles would not obey this order.

The apostles, on the other hand, were able to reverse their situation, thanks to the Holy Spirit. They endured the scourging, because they knew that they had received it for Jesus' sake. We see that they follow a totally different logic than the Sanhedrin. The text even mentions that they were *“glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the Name”*.

What kind of joy can one experience in being unjustly scourged? When we receive a just punishment, we might feel a certain satisfaction, because we are making amends and paying for something we did. We may even feel a sense of relief, because the matter may be brought to a conclusion.

However, the case of the apostles is different, for it was not a just punishment that they received, but an arbitrary act on the part of the authorities. The normal reaction to this would be to rebel, attack or demand justice.

The apostles, on the other hand, do not let themselves be carried away by natural reactions. They would certainly not have justified the unjust punishment; but they would have thought of the Lord, the Righteous One, who took upon Himself the injustice of this world and paid for it. Thus, at that moment, they joined their suffering to the suffering of Christ, allowing themselves to be treated unjustly.

This attitude went beyond natural reactions and was only possible through the Spirit of God and the intimate union the apostles had with God. This is how Holy Scripture can affirm that they *“left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the Name”*.

What was an injustice became for the apostles an honour, being able to imitate their Master. Hence the joy they experienced. It is not, therefore, a perverse complacency in mistreatment or masochism, but the joy of resembling the Lord.

In this way, the apostles become an example for us too. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord had already said: *"Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you"* (Mt 5:11-12).

The joy of the apostles is part of the beatitudes - an incredible transformation of the situation! On the one hand, there are the powerless and unjust punishers; on the other hand, the brave and happy sufferers.

It is not surprising that the apostles emerged strengthened from this situation, and that, far from obeying the order of the Sanhedrin, *"Every day they went on ceaselessly teaching and proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus, both in the temple and in private houses"*.